

OUR VIEW

GET TOUGH

Corps of Engineers refuses to see real need for the old C&D bridge

The haggling over the two bridges that cross the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal at Del. 1 and St. Georges has the aura of two giants playing chicken.

WHERE WE STAND

Traffic in southern New Castle County will soon require two bridges.

back and forth over the beautiful new bridge, glad that it replaced the rusting relic that languishes nearby. Yet the St. Georges Bridge is important to the state's long-term transportation needs. When traffic increases in southern New Castle County — and it will much sooner than later — all users could be affected by how this bridge standoff is resolved.

Delaware needed the new bridge to complete Del. 1. Through the efforts of the state's congressional delegation, the Corps of Engineers was forced to pay for its construction. But it was always clear that the corps was not interested in maintaining both structures.

Once the new bridge was finished, DelDOT unveiled a scenario in which both bridges would be necessary to handle future traffic. DelDOT and the state have an obvious option to refurbish and help maintain the old bridge. A private group is willing to take on this task, but the Corps of Engineers would have to first transfer ownership of the bridge to the state, which refused that arrangement. The Corps has since announced plans to tear down the old St. Georges bridge next year.

The corps' arrogance is nothing new. It is engaged in a congressionally driven plan to get out of its obligation to maintain bridges across the country. The Delaware squabble is just one part of that.

The problem is the Delaware Department of Transportation, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and residents of St. Georges are not the only ones affected by what happens. Most of us happily cruise

The newest brouhaha is over who should pay Conectiv for the new bridge's electricity. The corps says it will not as long as Delaware, through DelDOT, balks at allowing it to demolish the old St. Georges bridge. The state doesn't want to pay the bill because that might indicate future responsibility for maintaining the new bridge. The state claims the Corps of Engineers owes it \$32,000 for upkeep on the new bridge. Meanwhile, Conectiv twiddles its thumbs as the unpaid electric bill for the new bridge climbs toward \$60,000.

Conectiv is apparently reluctant to pull the plug on the bridge, not only because it is eager to be seen as a good corporate citizen but because it probably doesn't want to rile state officials angry over rolling electrical blackouts during last summer's heat wave. Too bad. Cutting off power to the new bridge — or at least threatening to do so — would probably be the quickest way to clear everyone's thinking about the situation.

DelDOT's arguments are substantial. It says the new bridge will be inadequate to handle the volume of traffic in a few years, and that it would be cheaper to refurbish the old bridge than to build another new one. Plus repair would much cheaper than tearing down the old bridge.

The Army Corps of Engineers is legally committed to providing canal crossings. Yet all it does is play a Catch 22 game with Delaware.

It seems certain that U.S. Sens. William Roth and Joseph Biden and Rep. Michael Castle will be dragged back into this mess again. The only talk the Army Corps of Engineers seems to understand is tough talk from Congress.